DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 447 736 FL 801 416

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TITLE Civics Education for Adult English Language Learners. ERIC Q & A.
INSTITUTION National Clearinghouse for ESL Literacy Education, Washington, DC.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Vocational and Adult Education (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE 2000-11-00
NOTE 6p.
CONTRACT ED-99-CO-0008
AVAILABLE FROM NCLE, 4646 40th Street, NW, Washington, DC 20016. Tel: 202-362-0700, ext. 200; E-mail: ncle@cal.org. For full text: http://www.cal.org/ncle/DIGESTS.
PUB TYPE ERIC Publications (071)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adult Education; *Citizenship; Citizenship Education; *Civics; *English (Second Language); Federal Legislation; Foreign Nationals; Immigrants; Literacy Education; Political Attitudes; Second Language Instruction; Second Language Learning

ABSTRACT

This article provides a brief historical review of efforts to prepare immigrants to pass the U.S. citizenship test, defines key terms, discusses events that have shaped civics education, and offers suggestions, whatever the approach chosen, for integrating civics content with English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) skills development. Covered topics include the following: a definition of civics education, events that have shaped civics education in the United States in the 20th century, a detailed summary and breakdown of some of the activities and approaches that integrate civics education with language learning at beginning, advanced, and intermediate levels, a description and review of resources available for civics education, and what is needed for English language/civics education programs to be successful. (Contains forty-five references and civics education resources.) (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse for ESL Literacy Education) (KFT)

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November 2000

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Civics Education for Adult English Language Learners

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Teaching about U.S. history and government and preparing immigrants to pass the U.S. citizenship test have been integral parts of curriculum and practice in adult immigrant education for more than a century. From classes sponsored by labor unions in the early 1900s to amnesty classes run by public schools, community-based organizations, and churches in the 1980s, English language and civics education have been paired (Silliman, 1997). Now, designated monies are being provided to states and individual programs for English Literacy/Civics Education. Because nearly 50% of all adults enrolled in federally funded education courses are English language learners, this program will have a significant national impact (U.S. Department of Education, 2000).

Some adult ESL teachers focus on the nuts and bolts of the naturalization process, teaching such topics as U.S. culture, holidays, and government. Others see it as a way for adults to learn English at the same time that they are learning to be comfortable and competent in a new environment (Terrill, 1994). Still others follow the participatory model of education and look to sociopolitical writings, such as those of Paulo Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), to guide learners to participate in making changes in social conditions (Auerbach, 1992, 1999; Peyton & Crandall, 1995). This Q&A defines key terms, discusses events that have shaped civics education, and offers suggestions, whatever the approach chosen, for integrating civics content with English as a second language (ESL) skills development.

What is civics education?

For adult English language learners, *civics education* is a broad term that includes

- instruction on how to gain U.S. citizenship;
- instruction about U.S. history and culture, including lessons on diversity and multiculturalism; and
- instruction and guidance on becoming active participants in their new communities.

Citizenship education is a subset of civics education. The goal of citizenship education is to help adult immigrants learn enough procedural information, content, and language to complete the naturalization process, pass the citizenship exam, and become U.S. citizens.

Encouraging *civic participation* may also be a part of civics education. Civic participation can be defined as the way that members of a community interact with the social, political, and educational structures around them. *Civic participation education*, then, is instruction that has as its goal assisting learners to understand how and why to become informed participants in their communities.

A key element of civic participation education for adult English language learners is that learning needs to have real-life consequences. One of its purposes is for learners to become active in community life. For example, learners might collaborate to fight for a community improvement, learn about and participate in the American electoral system (if appropriate), or join the local Parent Teacher Association (PTA).

What events have shaped civics education in this country?

The following national laws and initiatives have influenced conceptions of the need for civics education and the ways it is delivered:

- In 1906, a statute was enacted that required citizenship applicants to demonstrate ability in speaking English (Nixon & Keenan, 1997). This was during a period in U.S. history of unparalleled immigration (nearly 10% of the population was nonnative born). In response, community organizations such as settlement houses and labor unions organized classes in English and citizenship.
- Until the mid 1900s, immigration officials themselves decided who spoke English well enough to gain U.S. citizenship. Often, the sole requirement for citizenship was proof of lawful U.S. residency for five years. In 1950, a federal law mandated reading and writing skill levels that made it more difficult for immigrants to become citizens (Becker, 1993).
- In the late 1980s, adult ESL programs responded to the requirements of the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) of 1986. IRCA granted limited amnesty and permanent residence to undocumented immigrants (many of whom were displaced by unrest in Central America) who followed a specific application process and received at least 40 hours of instruction. Programs developed materials and curricula that included elements of both English and basic U.S. history and civics. See, for example, the *Handbook for ESL/*

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Civics Programming (Arlington Education and Employment Program [REEP], 1989) and *ESL/Civics Integration: A Guide for Curriculum Development and Lesson Planning* (Stiles, 1990).

- In 1996, changes in federal law limited some rights that immigrants had previously held, such as access to food stamps and other government services (Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, PL #104-193). These changes have renewed interest among immigrants in seeking citizenship, as they can protect their interests more fully by becoming citizens (Mitchell, 1998).
- Although some of the 1996 measures have since been eliminated or amended (National Immigration Law Center, 1998), obtaining citizenship remains a goal for many adults learning English. Benefits that are available to U.S. citizens include the right to vote in elections, to hold a U.S. passport, to sponsor family members for immigration, and to receive full social security benefits when they retire. Citizenship status also allows easier access to public benefits such as Supplemental Security Income (SSI) and protects immigrants from being deported for committing a crime (Becker, 2000).
- In 2000, the U.S. Department of Education's English Literacy/Civics Education initiative allocated money to 32 states and 12 demonstration grant recipients to help adults learn English while also learning about civil rights, civic participation and responsibility, and obtaining citizenship (U.S. Department of Education, 2000). It is anticipated that curricula and resource materials on civics education will be developed and made available by these projects.

What are some activities and approaches that integrate civics education with language learning?

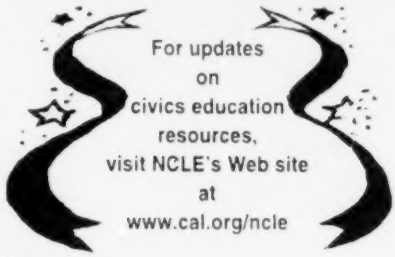
Adult immigrants and refugees often express interest in American culture, government, and history. While the complexity of the language varies from level to level, significant content can be imparted at all levels at the same time learners are acquiring English.

Beginning levels

Practitioners can help literacy learners understand about community, government, and history while doing hands-on activities, pre-reading activities, and activities that help them develop fine motor skills needed for writing. Learners can make collages representing their community with pictures cut from magazines, alphabetize names of states or label maps, practice sight word recognition of high office holders or of community institutions such as *library* and *INS*, or match pictures of these institutions or people with their names or titles.

Beginning learners can participate in a language experience activity (LEA) where they express their opinions about an important social or political issue. For example, a literacy level class in Virginia talked about their ideas on the eve of Desert Storm in 1991. Many of these adults had emigrated from war-torn countries and had strong feelings that they wanted to share in English with their classmates. With some assistance with verbs (*think, hope, feel, want*, etc.) and some modeling from the teacher and stronger students, the class was able to produce a powerful written statement about war. Initially, class members spoke and listened. Later, the group writing was used for reading, fill-in-the-blank, and dictation activities.

Simple games such as bingo or concentration can be played to reinforce any set of words that learners have been working with in a content unit. Community place names or names of states, presidents, or important Americans can be used instead of the more usual health, housing, and job vocabulary.



Intermediate levels

Teachers can devise information-gap activities about American culture and history. For example, a teacher might write two paragraphs about the first Thanksgiving, controlling the level of vocabulary, structure, and content of each paragraph to address the English level of each individual. Partner A reads the first paragraph to Partner B. Partner B has the same text minus certain words or phrases. (The teacher would have deleted certain structural words such as conjunctions, adverbs, and auxiliary verbs, and content words such as *pilgrims, Massasoit, and Plymouth.*) Partner B listens, perhaps asking for clarification, and writes the missing words. Then Partner B reads the second paragraph to Partner A who must listen, understand, and write a different set of words or phrases. Learners absorb the civics content and practice language skills as they read silently and aloud, listen, write, and later compare notes.

For intermediate and advanced learners, the World Wide Web can provide access to real-life civics content and real-life use of English. For example, learners—alone, in pairs, or in small groups—can research different aspects of their local government, read the information, make notes, and conduct a debate or give a short oral presentation to the class. Topics on a local government Web site might include the fall leaf collection schedule, online access to the local library system, bicycle safety rules, or an explanation of the local government system and officials. Learners can choose issues that are important to them, access the information they need, hone technology skills, and be active participants in their community while at the same time improving reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills.

Advanced levels

Advanced English language learners are usually concerned about grammar, writing, and listening and speaking in complex or academic contexts. Attending and participating in local school board meetings, inviting local officials to speak to the class, and volunteering in community organizations are ways advanced learners can participate in the community while using and improving their communicative skills. Writing letters to the editor, e-mailing members of Congress or the president, and researching and writing an essay about an aspect of American history or culture are ways to expand literacy skills.

A recent approach to language education, ***project-based learning***, appears to be particularly effective for civics education. A project generally integrates speaking, listening, reading, and writing; incorporates team work and problem-solving approaches; and encourages learners to engage in independent work that requires using English in authentic contexts. (Moss & Van Duzer, 1998; REEP, 1997; Weinstein, 1999). Projects can take place within one class meeting, over several weeks, or even become the focus of the entire class. Publishing learner writing in books or on the World Wide Web, running letter-writing campaigns, and researching and reporting on class-designated topics are all projects. The impetus to participate in the community can arise from a classroom discussion or brainstorming session, an issue in a class member's life or on the news, or an activity the teacher designs with learners to help them use English in a community context.

In the Family Literacy and Learning Program of the Arlington Education and Employment Program (REEP), learners and teachers created an activity-and-coloring book about their community. Learners with diverse language skills accessed information about their community and shared it with others through the publication of the book and a "meet the authors" day at the local library (Greniuk, 1998). The intermediate-level class researched community information and designed the community book. Learners developed reading skills, telephone communication skills, and language functions such as asking for clarification and negotiating with one another. The beginning-level class copied and alphabetized important community resources (e.g., the hospital and the library) that the intermediate class had investigated. The children and adults in both classes illustrated the book. The entire family literacy program was able to learn important neighborhood information, acquire and practice real-life language skills, and offer a resource to their community.

In Dover, New Hampshire, an ESL class wrote and published a survival guide for adult immigrants that discusses such topics as the difficulty of making friends in the United States, the fact that Americans will often go to work when they are sick, and the importance of keeping to a schedule in this country. The class shared the book with native English speakers in an Adult Basic Education (ABE) class (Hutton, 2000).

A North Carolina educator has developed a course outline for beginning-level learners in a civics education program that uses photography. Learners take pictures in their communities to reflect their identity, the communities they belong to, places in the community they feel are accessible or not, and places where they feel comfortable and accepted or not. They will use these photographs to tell stories about how they can protect or exercise their rights as community members or citizens. The learners may also interview a person in their community whom they believe to be active or a leader (L. McGrail, personal communication, September 2000). Learners will not only practice communicative skills, but will also learn how to express opinions about important community issues.

What resources are available for civics education?

Immigrants seeking citizenship face many challenges. These include frequently changing laws and procedures, bureaucratic and electronic delays, backlogs of applicants, and both the lack of English skills and the lack of time to learn. As a result, some adult ESL teachers, particularly those teaching in specially designated citizenship classes, may focus on developing the English skills and civics knowledge required to pass the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) citizenship test. INS maintains an informational Web site for the general public, (http://www.ins.usdoj.gov/); learners, however, may have difficulty understanding the English used on the site. Some resources, such as application forms, can be found on the site.

For suggestions for classroom activities and resources to prepare learners to take the citizenship test, see *Citizenship Preparation for Adult Learners* (Nixon & Keenan, 1997). In addition, the resources listed at the end of this paper will assist practitioners in offering civics instruction.

The National Institute for Literacy (NIFL) has recently funded an ESL and civics education special collection for the Web as part of its LINCS system. The site, which will be at http://literacynet.org/esl, will provide teacher resources.

What is needed for English language/civics education to be successful?

The large number of English language learners in adult education programs, as well as new funding initiatives from the U.S. Department of Education, have heightened interest in the integrating of language development with civics education. Materials and resources will be identified and created. For this initiative to be successful, however, training for teachers will be needed both on what to teach and how to teach it.

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